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ABSTRACT

The valuing of diversity can be taught to others and should be a major part of any school's comprehensive guidance program. In the valuing diversity model ASK, "A" stands for awareness of self and others; "S" stands for sensitivity and skills; and "K" stands for knowledge cultures different from one's own. School counselors hold the key to the teaching and the valuing of diversity. They know how to communicate effectively with others regardless of their or the other person's cultural background. They are skilled in how to "tune in to" the feelings of others, how to put the speaker at ease by clarifying the content of what was just said, how to show interest in others through the use of open-ended questions, etc. Through structured guidance and counseling approaches all students and teachers can be taught these facilitative communication skills. (ABL)

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Valuing Diversity in the Schools: The Counselor's Role

Joe Wittmer

Overview

The valuing of diversity in the schools is no longer merely a social goal. With the make-up of the student body changing so rapidly, school counselors, teachers and administrators realize that they are now required to learn new techniques and skills for understanding, motivating, teaching, and empowering each individual student regardless of race, gender, religion or creed. We are a nation of diverse populations and groups. The future of our society depends upon our ability to effectively talk with one another, to reach mutual understanding, and to realize that in diversity there is strength.

By the year 2056, the "average" U.S. citizen will trace his or her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic countries, the Pacific Islands—almost anywhere but white Europe (Wittmer, 1992). Obviously, the United States is changing significantly. By the year 2000 the population of the U.S. will be 43% people of color. In 1990, over 30% of the public school students were either African-American or Hispanic. The statistical meaning of the word minority is quickly losing its significance, especially in America's classrooms. And by the year 2075, African Americans, Alaskan Natives, American Natives, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans will be the statistical majority in the United States (Locke, 1992).

School counselors can serve as catalysts to insure that teachers, students and others learn how to value diversity. That is, the valuing of diversity can be taught to others and should be a major part of any school's comprehensive guidance program.

The Valuing Diversity Model: ASK

The "A" in ASK stands for Awareness of self and others. Self and other awareness is a must if cultural diversity is to be appreciated in our schools and elsewhere. The "S" in ASK refers to both Sensitivity and Skills. Sensitivity to others as well as new, innovative, communication. Skills are needed by students and others if we are to learn to value diversity and intercultural communication is to improve. The "K" stands for Knowledge of cultures different from our own. Culture influences feelings, thoughts, non-verbal behaviors, ideas and perceptions and "cognitive empathy" (knowledge) of another's culture is needed to improve intercultural relationships.

Awareness of Self and Others

Self-aware individuals avoid a condescending attitude and do not patronize culturally different persons. To patronize implies the belief that we hold a superior position to them—we come across to them as being "better" than they. And members of other cultural groups view this as disrespectful. Relatedly, some Anglo Americans seem to have a characteristic that could best be described as "assumed similarity." That is, they assume that people either ought to be like them or want to be like them! Self-aware individuals do not hold such assumptions (Wittmer, 1990).

Students of all ages can be taught, through various guidance and counseling activities, to be more aware of self and others (Wittmer & Scott, 1991).

Sensitivity and Communication Skills

Our sensitivity toward and willingness to understand others is a major key to effective communication with the culturally different. We need to be aware of others' thoughts and feelings, regardless of their race, creed or cultural background. Effective, multicultural communicators are aware of other persons' frames of reference, their views of the world. And, they understand that worldviews are influenced by culture.

We can learn communication skills that will assist us in understanding how others view their worlds and react to them, as opposed to telling them how they should react and behave toward their own worlds! Their worldviews may be very different from ours, but they are based on their perceptions—which are their "realities." And, their reality determines how they feel, think and behave.

How sensitive are you to your own views of those who are different? Do you view other cultures as equally valuable to yours? Is your cultural group superior to another? Are you culturally sensitive to your own heritage and the possibility that you were taught (perhaps unconsciously) to be prejudiced as a part of your upbringing? Do you value and respect differences? Are you aware of your own values and biases and how they affect those who are culturally different? Do you avoid stereotyping and labeling? Do you monitor your own assumptions about those different from you? Are you willing to accept someone of a different race into your organization, i.e., your sorority, your fraternity, your church? It is important that each of us examine ourselves concerning these questions if we hope to become culturally skilled communicators (Wittmer, 1992).

The emerging sense of worth of members of culturally distinct populations can no longer be neglected. Learning about their different values, attitudes, desires, aspirations, and beliefs is

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necessary because it effects all of us. Learning skills to help us communicate effectively with people from different cultures will speed up this necessary learning process.

Knowledge of the Culturally Different

Feelings, thoughts, nonverbal behaviors, and ideas are important in interpersonal communication and are culturally influenced and learned (Wittmer, 1992). As noted, empathy, interest in others, caring, personal awareness, sensitivity and understanding are stressed as important to effective interpersonal communication and to learning to value diversity. However, having these core conditions present is not always enough for effective communication with a person from another race or culture. We also need "cognitive" empathy. That is, knowledge of that person's culture, or knowing "where that person is coming from" is also extremely important (Wittmer, 1992).

Students of all ages can be taught to be culturally skilled. A culturally skilled communicator is willing to gain cognitive knowledge about different cultures, i.e., their history, cultural values, current problems and lifestyles and how this impacts on their respective worldview. This may be the most important thing we can do in becoming more effective intercultural communicators.

It is important that we approach different cultural members with understanding over and above our feelings. That is, having strong feelings of support for a particular culture and its participants is necessary. However, it is not enough to truly communicate with participants from that cultural group. If we are ignorant of the values and ways of participants from cultural groups different from ours, we will certainly be less effective communicators than we would be if we operated with accurate, cognitive understanding of them. The teaching of the values and ways of other cultural groups can, and should be, central to any comprehensive school guidance program.

Implementing the Model: The School Counselor's Role

The professional school counselor possesses many excellent communication skills that can, and should be, shared and taught to teachers, administrators, students, and others.

The "cognitive knowledge" aspect of the above described model can easily be generalized to the school setting. There are many effective ways that students can obtain knowledge about others' cultures, e.g., outside speakers from different cultural backgrounds, culturally distinct student panels, field trips, etc. Learning about other cultures should be a major component of any guidance curriculum, regardless of the school level.

In addition, self awareness, awareness of others and sensitivity to self and others in regard to diversity can and should be a major component of any comprehensive school guidance program. Many guidance activities can be developed and delivered by various modes with these themes in mind (Wittmer, 1992).

School counselors know how to communicate effectively with others regardless of their or the other person's cultural background. They are skilled in how to "tune in to" the feelings of others, how to put the speaker at ease by clarifying the content of what was just said, how to show interest in others through the use of open-ended questions, etc. And the research is clear, these skills can be taught to students of all ages, i.e., there is considerable evidence that peers can become very effective in helping other peers (Myrick & Folk, 1991). And, through structured guidance and counseling approaches all students and teachers can be taught these facilitative communication skills.

Conclusion

Counselors can conduct in-service training with the teachers in their respective schools to incorporate the ASK model described above. For example, teachers can learn the facilitative skills previously mentioned (with minimal training) and learn how to put them into practice in their everyday subject matter classes (Wittmer & Myrick, 1989). It has been demonstrated that teachers can—and want to learn how—to put "group facilitative skills" to work in their classrooms. That is, teachers can learn how to have students "tune in to," "listen with empathy," etc. to one another on a daily, routine basis. This increases student awareness of and sensitivity toward others regardless of race or cultural background. Not only will this create a classroom environment more conducive to learning, it ensures that students learn new skills which will ultimately lead to a better understanding of others and to a valuing of diversity in the school. School counselors hold the key to the teaching and the valuing of diversity.

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